



MEETING REPORT

Thursday, August 22, 2002

Project Steering Committee Meeting No. 4 – Alternative Scenarios and Design Options

6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Auditorium, West End Multi-Service Center (170 Heights Boulevard)

The fourth meeting of the project Steering Committee was opened at approximately 6:00 p.m. by Patricia Rincon-Kallman, Assistant Director of the City of Houston Planning & Development Department.

Meeting discussions and consultant presentations covered topics including:

- Project status and meeting objectives;
- High capacity transit (HCT) modes;
- Review of alternative transit and development scenarios; and,
- Design opinion survey.

Project Status and Meeting Objectives

After briefly reviewing the project milestones to date, Bret Keast of Wilbur Smith Associates (WSA) explained that the purpose of the meeting was to have the Steering Committee identify preferences for HCT mode, alignment and number of transit stations and the level of development density for HCT in the study area.

Overview of High Capacity Transit (HCT) Modes

Next, Kirsten Tucker of LKC Consulting Services gave a presentation introducing the various high capacity transit (HCT) modes. The presentation covered heavy rail, commuter rail, automated guideway, light rail (LRT), and bus rapid transit (BRT). The consultant team explained the characteristics of each mode, identified criteria that must be considered when selecting a mode, and presented an evaluation of each mode based on the criteria. The criteria indicated that two modes – LRT and BRT – would be most appropriate for the study area. The discussion following this presentation included the following general topics:

- Future concerns regarding both modes were discussed. One Steering Committee member was concerned about the future cost of electricity to operate light rail, as well as the cost to maintain light rail vehicles and associated equipment relative to bus maintenance costs (plus land acquisition for new LRT maintenance facilities).
- Ridership levels and capacity were discussed. BRT vehicles have varied capacity, ranging from 60 to 100 riders. LRT cars have capacity for 100 passengers. The number of riders that will be served needs to be considered in selecting the mode. Transporting 100 passengers with one rail car may be less expensive in the long run than transporting the same number of passengers with two BRT vehicles. One committee



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member also noted the congestion factor from multiple buses on roadways versus LRT. Another responded that empty LRT cars are not good if ridership is low.

- One Steering Committee member noted that with such significant residential development occurring at the edge of the city, heavy rail would be better for long-distance commuting while buses would be faster in certain locations.
- One Steering Committee member asked how long the life span is of BRT and LRT vehicles. With proper maintenance, BRT vehicles generally last about 12 years, and LRT vehicles generally last 25 to 30 years.

Review of Alternative Transit and Development Scenarios

Ted Knowlton of Fregonese Calthorpe Associates (FCA) presented the results of the Small Group Development Scenarios Workshop conducted on Thursday, July 18, 2002. The purpose of the workshop was to construct potential development scenarios for the two HCT alignments - Alignment B and Alignment C. Using chips that symbolized different land uses, workshop participants broke into five groups and created conceptual development scenarios. Using the results of the workshop and data on certain cost factors, the consultant team identified the potential for redevelopment in the study area, creating two scenarios for each alignment. The alternative scenarios represent two degrees of redevelopment potential, one more conservative and the other more extensive.

Mr. Knowlton's presentation of the alternative scenarios was followed by Steering Committee discussion. **Throughout the discussion, the consultant team emphasized that the redevelopment scenarios do not reflect what is going to happen or what anyone wishes would happen, only what could happen based on property values and other cost factors affecting redevelopment potential.** The discussion included the following general topics:

- Scenario 1, Alignment B – One Steering Committee member said there is a lot of potential for redevelopment along 11th Street if the alignment could be moved to 11th as far as Yale (there was some confusion whether this individual actually meant 11th Street or the abandoned rail corridor along 7th Street, which is what Alignment B follows).
- Scenario 2, Alignment B – One Steering Committee member noted that in some areas the development scenario land uses are opposite of the current land uses (e.g., in the northwestern corner of the study area, one development scenario shows residential housing in an existing industrial/commercial area). The consultant team reminded everyone that the scenario maps reflect the input and ideas of workshop participants. One Steering Committee member felt an additional transit station was needed between the two westernmost transit stations reflected in this scenario.
- Scenario 1, Alignment C – One Steering Committee member noted that a node of development adjacent to the Northwest Transit Center is shown within the I-10/610 interchange area. In a previous map, the node was farther north, which is more appropriate. The consultant team said they would correct this item.



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- Scenario 2, Alignment C – One Steering Committee member noted that Heights residents are very sensitive to the subject of redevelopment along Heights Boulevard. The Steering Committee also recommended the consultant team talk with Brownfields Program Coordinator Dawn Moses about brownfields redevelopment. It was also pointed out that a transit station appeared to be placed at the intersection of Washington and Westcott, which would conflict with the Roundabout project. The consultant team explained that the placement of the transit center was a result of the conceptual nature and scale of the maps and the transit center would be shown at its intended location several blocks to the east along Washington Avenue.
- The Steering Committee noted that many banks are not willing to finance mixed-use development, such as the “live-work” units mentioned in the Inner Katy discussions. The consultant team acknowledged this obstacle but said that financing has not been a problem in other cities as the transit system expands and redevelopment successes occur.
- Representatives from the Sixth Ward expressed concern over the redevelopment shown in this area. The Sixth Ward is a National Historic District in which significant redevelopment is not appropriate. The Steering Committee members wanted this situation reflected on the scenario maps, as well as the larger National Historic District boundary versus the City of Houston designation. The Steering Committee was concerned that, while the scenarios are merely conceptual, they could be misconstrued if developers or other outside parties saw them. The consultant team will make these changes to the maps. The consultant team also said they would like to know of any development criteria and/or deed restrictions in other neighborhoods that would substantially limit redevelopment options. Another committee member noted serious sanitary sewer problems in portions of the Inner Katy study area.
- Steering Committee members requested clarification regarding the source of property values and prevailing area rents. Prevailing rents came from a variety of sources, which are documented in the draft report chapters. The property values used for the development scenarios were higher than the valuation data the committee saw in earlier draft documents. The values were inflated by 50 percent to more closely reflect actual sale values in the study area.
- One consultant team member pointed out that the cost model used to determine redevelopment potential does not consider infrastructure cost or the future value of land when developing scenarios. It was noted that the consultant team and Steering Committee should be mindful of the balance among redevelopment, traffic congestion, and “sense of place” when looking at scenarios and alternatives.

After the scenarios were presented, the consultant team asked the Steering Committee to identify their preferences for the Inner Katy area in terms of HCT mode, alignment and number of transit centers as well as the density and pattern of development (preferred development scenario). The Steering Committee’s discussion points for each decision item are outlined below.



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HCT Mode Preference

- One Steering Committee member expressed a preference for LRT, but felt deploying BRT as an interim step would be beneficial. The consultant team said METRO is conducting studies in which BRT is seen as comparable and convertible to LRT. The consultant team also said that historically, little redevelopment has occurred at BRT stations, perhaps as a result of the lesser amount of right-of-way obtained by the transit agency to develop BRT. The Steering Committee agreed that transit system integration is important, particularly with regard to the local bus network and the transit mode chosen for the Outer Katy corridor. A METRO representative cautioned that regardless of the Steering Committee's preference, a final mode would not be chosen until federally mandated studies were conducted. The Steering Committee, overall, expressed a preference for LRT.

HCT Alignment Preference

- The Steering Committee discussed designing Alignment C as a couplet on Washington Avenue and Center Street, the benefit being that more right-of-way will remain available on Washington (for automobile and bicycle lanes, sidewalks and parking) and redevelopment potential will increase for Center. A Steering Committee member said that historically, rail ran as a couplet down Washington and Center. One Steering Committee member said Alignment B has greater potential for redevelopment due to the extent of vacant land. Alignment B runs along part of Washington as well, so Washington Avenue can still benefit from HCT. Another committee member, however, felt the sharp angles on Alignment B would slow down LRT. Also, the available land along Alignment B could be gone in five years. Overall, the Steering Committee members preferred Alignment C.

Number of Transit Stations Preference

- After some discussion, the Steering Committee members concluded that seven stations is a reasonable number for Inner Katy.

Redevelopment Scenario Preference

- Overall, the Steering Committee members preferred redevelopment Scenario 2 for Alignment C.

Due to limited time, some of the topics above were not debated in detail and were decided based on a quick “show of hands” after brief discussion to determine prevailing positions among the Steering Committee members. This will enable the consultant team to continue its technical work on these topics for further committee review and consideration.

Design Opinion Survey

Finally, the consultant team conducted a design opinion survey to gauge the Steering Committee's reactions to potential redevelopment design concepts. Joe Webb of Joe Webb Architects showed a sequence of more than 100 photographs of buildings, street scenes



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and parks and asked committee members to rate their impressions of the images as each picture was viewed for 10-15 seconds. On a survey form, committee members circled one to five stars to show their level of dislike or like, then quickly identified what they did or did not like about the picture in terms of architecture/style, compatibility, building materials, landscaping and scale. The results of this exercise will be compiled and incorporated into the process of finalizing a preferred TOD scenario for Inner Katy.

Upcoming Project Meetings and Activities

The new date for the final Steering Committee meeting is Thursday, September 12th, at the usual meeting location at West End. Rescheduling of the Town Hall Meeting (from September 11th) for presentation of the final study results had not yet been finalized as of this Steering Committee meeting. The new Town Hall date was later confirmed as Wednesday, October 9th, at 6:00 p.m. at the West End Multi-Service Center.